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ABSTRACT

Educators are considering ways to help youth identified as "at-risk" succeed in school and beyond. Alternative programs (AP) can be effective environments for students who may not fit the mainstream mold and need additional support. Effective AP use a holistic approach that encompasses social, academic, psychological and career-related needs. The following eight factors consistently recur in research reports and descriptions of effective AP: (1) caring, knowledgeable adults; (2) a sense of community; (3) an assets approach; (4) respect for youth; (5) high expectations for academic achievement and responsible behavior; (6) holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional developmental curriculum; (7) authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work; and (8) support and long-term followup services. Some examples of AP include: career academies (small learning communities that engage students by focusing on career interests and rigorous academics that reflect high expectations); YouthBuild USA (program features include supportive peer-group communities, community service, culturally appropriate curricula, youth leadership, and follow-up through alumni clubs and support services such as information, counseling, and job placement); and Bridge over Troubled Waters (comprehensive programs and services include nontraditional outreach, runaway services, a preemployment program reflecting an assets approach, health education/peer counseling, parenting support, and a program for youth with developmental disabilities). (CG)

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by Sandra Kerka
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Alternatives for At-Risk and Out-of-School Youth

"At risk" is a problematic term, a label that "may place students at more risk than internal and external factors" (Sanders 2000, p. 3). Many youth "at risk" are not well served by mainstream schooling, and in this era of standardized testing the stakes are high for them and for schools (Raywid 2001). Thus, educators are considering alternative ways to help these youth succeed in school and beyond. This Digest examines research on what makes alternative programs effective environments for youth at risk and describes programs in which these factors play a key role.

Who is at risk and at risk of what? Common definitions of "who" cite members of disadvantaged groups, those who experience difficulty in academic and social domains, and those in both categories (Croninger and Lee 2001). "What" means academic failure, dropout (with diminished prospects for future employment), or participation in risky behaviors such as substance abuse and criminal activity (Lewis 2003; McDonald 2002). However, "risk" indicates probability, not explanation and this ambiguous label creates and perpetuates low expectations (Croninger and Lee 2001). Youth identified as at risk are often those who do not fit the mainstream mold; their learning styles, learning disabilities, or life experiences may be factors in low achievement or behavior considered unacceptable. Critics suggest that this "mismatch between learner and learning system" (Sagor 1999, cited in McDonald 2002) should prompt the question "Is the school at risk of failing the child?" (Sanders 2000, p. 5). Do we change the child or the environment? (Raywid 2001).

Features of Effective Alternatives

Young people considered at risk need the same things as other children and adolescents; opportunities to learn and develop, guidance in making constructive choices, and help with specific problems or situations (Grobe et al. 2001). "If there are differences in what 'at-risk' youth need," they are likely to include intensive, longer-term support and a greater number or range of services (ibid., p. 33). In addition, their experiences of failure may contribute to low self-efficacy and limit their aspirations and hopes about future life and work (Conchas and Clark 2002). Out-of-school youth also have an immediate need for gainful employment or training that will prepare them for it. Thus, alternative programs need a holistic approach that encompasses social, academic, psychological, and career-related needs. Eight factors consistently recur in research reports and descriptions of effective alternative programs.

First is the presence of *caring, knowledgeable adults*, who may be "teachers, counselors, mentors, case workers, community members...who understand and deeply care about youth and provide significant time and attention" (James and Jurich 1999, p. x). Disaffected youth often feel that teachers, administrators, and others are not interested in their well-being and success (Grobe et al. 2001). Caring adults help establish a climate of trust and support that lets youth know someone is paying attention.

Second is *a sense of community*. Numerous studies have shown the impact of small learning communities on achievement and youth development (Castellano et al. 2001; McDonald 2002; Raywid 2001; Secada 1999). "Youth who have participated in successful youth programs report that the major factor that helped them succeed in their second chance program was a feeling of belonging" (Grobe et al. 2001, p. 35). Types of learning communities that have proven effective include career academies (Conchas and Clark 2002; Elliott et al. 2002; Kemple 2001) and community-based programs such as YouthBuild (Lewis 2003; Pines 1999).

In an *assets approach*, youth are seen as having resources rather than deficits. Research demonstrates that children with more assets, or social capital, are less likely to engage in risky behavior (Croninger and Lee 2001; Grobe et al. 2001). A National Academy of Sciences study that examined scientific evidence from youth development programs validated the importance of such assets as "connectedness, feeling valued, attachment to prosocial institutions, the ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts, commitment to civic engagement, good conflict resolution and planning for the future skills, a sense of personal responsibility, strong moral character, self-esteem, confidence in one's personal efficacy, and a sense of a larger purpose in life" (Lewis 2003, p. 35).

Caring adults, small communities, and a focus on assets demonstrate the fourth factor, *respect for youth*. A perceived lack of respect from peers and adults alienates and marginalizes students. One of the lessons of YouthBuild is that positive youth development is grounded in "profound respect for the intelligences and talents of all youth" (Lewis 2003, p. 47). Secada's (1999) assessment of the Hispanic Dropout Project notes that many students in alternative programs have already made adult life decisions. Project staff treated them as adults, and students responded to that treatment, calling to mind the Spanish saying "Respetos guardan respetos" (respect evokes respect).

One way to show respect is to have *high expectations for academic achievement and responsible behavior*, the fifth factor in effective alternative programs. Program evaluations demonstrate that disaffected and at-risk students can succeed at high levels when challenged; high expectations and standards also pay off in terms of postsecondary education and employment (James and Jurich 1999). An analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Study data indicated that high expectations accompanied by teacher supportiveness fostered high school achievement (Sanders 2000). However, high standards and expectations must be partnered with appropriate learning supports to help students meet the standards (Castellano et al. 2001).

High expectations are part of a *holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional developmental curriculum*, the sixth factor in effective alternative programs. Instead of focusing on negative behaviors, "treating individuals holistically may provide sufficient protective factors to overcome a variety of risk factors, such as lack of attachment to a caring adult, health needs, and violence in communities" (James and Jurich 1999, p. xiii). A comprehensive approach includes an array of educational options that respond to student needs, interests, and learning styles (Pines 1999); opportunities for students to experience success (Elliott et al. 2002); a focus on youth development and resilience (Grobe et al. 2001; Lewis 2003); and access to services, including health care, rehabilitation, assistance with the juvenile justice system, and others (James and Jurich 1999, p. xiv).

At-risk students' experiences of isolation, marginalization, and failure contribute to a lack of optimism; they are disaffected with schooling because they cannot see an authentic connection between learning and future life and work (Conchas and Clark 2002). Alternative programs that provide *authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work* can instill hope in these youth. Program evaluations indicate that integrated academic and vocational education, career development, and work-based learning contributed to successful results (James and Jurich 1999). As Conchas and Clark (2002) discovered, the connected and focused curriculum of a career academy gave students "a solid foundation to pursue their college and career goals. They affirmed their professional expectations and remained optimistic despite adversity" (p. 305).

The eighth factor in effective programs is *support and long-term follow-up services*. "Programs offering services over a long period of time, pos-

sibly many years, foster trust in youth because there is time to develop relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults *and* because the young people believe they will not be abandoned after a short time. Programs are also more effective if they have long-term follow-up with participants for 6 months to several years after participants are placed in jobs or go on to postsecondary education or training" (James and Jurich 1999, p. xvi).

Examples of Alternative Programs

How are educators putting these principles into practice? Alternative programs in three settings—in-school career academies, an alternative high school for out-of-school youth, and a program for homeless out-of-school youth—are described.

A growing body of research (e.g., Elliott et al. 2002; Kemple 2001) is demonstrating that career academies seem to be most successful for at-risk students. They are small learning communities with an engaging focus on students' career interests and future plans and rigorous academics that reflect high expectations. The best are staffed by dedicated teachers with deep knowledge of and interest in their students (Conescu et al. 2000). Conchas and Clark's (2002) comparison of two academies in the same school points out some key differences. In both, students had higher graduation and college entrance rates and greater optimism. However, the Medical Academy's underlying philosophy was focused on constructing success for the least academically successful students. Moreover, it forged a strong cross-ethnic learning community of mutual respect and support that reflected the racial makeup of the larger school and provided students with tools for future social development and mobility.

YouthBuild USA "engages disconnected youth who have no apparent path to a productive future by teaching them basic academic, life, leadership, and employability skills through work on community housing rehabilitation projects" and attendance at an alternative high school (Pines 1999, p. 9). Its underlying philosophy of respect sees youth as untapped resources for the development of their own communities. Program features include supportive peer-group communities, community service, culturally appropriate curricula, youth leadership development and participation in governance, and follow-up through alumni clubs and support services such as information, counseling, and job placement (Conescu et al. 2002; Pines 1999). From 1988-1998, YouthBuild programs served more than 20,000 youth aged 16-24 with (1) opportunities to perform meaningful work while learning marketable skills; (2) warm relationships with caring adults committed to youth; (3) systematic attention to improving basic skills toward achievement of a diploma, GED certificate, or college entrance; and (4) a safe community in which to dream and achieve goals (Pines 1999).

The mission of Bridge over Troubled Waters in Boston is "doing whatever it takes" to help runaway, homeless, and other at-risk youth. Its vision, mission, and philosophy are intended to let young people know that there are adults who care for and respect them and to build their sense of accomplishment, purpose, direction, and hope for the future. The comprehensive programs and services offered include the Streetwork program of nontraditional outreach and recruitment; runaway services that meet immediate survival needs; a preemployment program providing basic skills, career development, and college preparation; health education/peer counseling; parenting support; and Bridges to Inclusion for youth with developmental disabilities ("Bridge over Troubled Waters" 2003). The preemployment component reflects an assets approach implemented by caring, well-trained staff. It includes a curriculum geared toward assisting youth in developing self-awareness about their assets and limitations.

One outcome of Bridge provides an important lesson for any alternative program: "Identification of capacities and resiliency was strengthened as the way to establish positive working relationships with youth who are runaway, homeless or at risk. These individuals often come from unstable backgrounds with little continuity in their home, school and work lives. The danger in looking at the problems or looking for disabilities among these youth rather than abilities is that the relationship begins on a negative footing. This negativity often is what the client might want most to avoid" (ibid., n.p.). Not all alternative programs will be able to provide the depth and breadth of services offered by Bridge over Troubled Waters. However, Bridge, YouthBuild, and the Medical Academy each have a strong foundational philosophy that offers young people "opportunities to feel a sense of support, a sense of belonging, a sense of control over their lives, and hope for the future" (ibid., n.p.). Alternative programs with a clear sense of purpose and a structure that includes many of the eight factors identified in this Digest may be the best hope for disaffected youth.

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